

Unconditional Parenting and Secure Attachment

Nobo Komagata
Sachiko Komagata
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During their pregnancies, parents-to-be may read a lot of books on pregnancy, delivery, and child-rearing. But when the reality of dealing with newborn babies begins, even they may not be fully prepared for actual parenting. Naturally, every parent must be hoping to provide the best for his or her children. In his *Unconditional Parenting*, Alfie Kohn (2005) discusses the following point. The most important thing is unconditional love of children, without the tools of conditional parenting such as abuse of authority, love withdrawal, excessive control, punishment, and rewards. He also states that with unconditional parenting, the children will in turn become parents who would love their own children unconditionally. On Amazon.com, Kohn's book receives many excellent reviews, such as "eye-opener," "amazing," "best parenting book," and "changed my life." However, there also are negative reviews such as "unrealistic," "impractical," and "lacks the specifics." While many parents seem able to understand and appreciate Kohn's message, the same message is not understood and/or appreciated by others. Some parents seem to be very resistant to Kohn's ideas without being able to say why, even when they agree that unconditional parenting *sounds* ideal. In his book, Kohn actually anticipates such resistance and writes that parents may be resistive based on their experience, thoughts/beliefs, and/or feelings (including fear). For example, Kohn writes, "if you haven't experienced empathic parenting, it's hard for you to become such a parent yourself." Empathy is an essential component of unconditional parenting. Thus, this suggests that there are people who may have an inherent problem with unconditional/empathic parenting.

Kohn's statement quoted above is actually based on the work of John Bowlby, who, with Mary Ainsworth, pioneered the field of attachment theory (for an excellent, detailed review of the field, see Karen, 1994; for a concise discussion of the theory, see Komagata and Komagata, 2008). Note that attachment theory is different from attachment parenting; the latter emphasizes the importance of child-parent bonding mainly through physically being close to the child. Since attachment theory offers deep insight into how child-parent interaction develops, it would be interesting to discuss unconditional parenting with respect to relevant notions in attachment theory. In particular, the notion of "secure attachment" (roughly, a state of child-parent relation such that the parent responds to the child sensitively and consistently) seems to be closely related to the quality of those who practice unconditional parenting. But what exactly is the connection between the two? An answer to this question could allow us to

apply the results in attachment theory research and discuss various aspects of unconditional and conditional parenting. In addition, we may be able to shed some light on why and in what way some parents are resistant to the idea of unconditional parenting. Could they too understand and benefit from Kohn's ideas with some help?

Before proceeding, let us briefly review unconditional parenting and attachment theory, in that order. Kohn describes unconditional love as a kind of love which "doesn't hinge on how they [children] act, whether they're successful or well behaved or anything else." Kohn points out that with unconditional love, children "can accept themselves as fundamentally good people" and "are freer to accept (and help) other people." Unconditional parenting, thus, would focus on the whole child, not just their behaviors, and work with children to satisfy their needs and solve problems together rather than controlling them with punishments and rewards. Other tools of conditional parenting include abuse of authority, love withdrawal (including time-outs), and focus on achievements through competitions. According to Kohn, with these techniques, children will become cynical about their parents' self-centeredness and will either superficially comply with their parents or violently resist them.

Attachment theory concerns the quality of the child-parent relationship and distinguishes between secure and insecure attachment patterns. Attachment patterns can be identified by a simple laboratory test called the Strange Situation for infants at the age of one. An infant who is securely attached to her parent would resist and cry when she is separated from her parent but will return to being happy after reunion. An infant with insecure attachment may fall into one of the following three patterns. An avoidant infant would almost ignore her parent upon departure and return. An ambivalent infant would be clingy and angry at her parent. A disorganized infant would often show behaviors which combine attachment to and fear of her parent at the same time. A child would be securely attached if her parent responds to her physical and, more importantly, emotional needs in a timely manner, at an appropriate level, and with consistency. The parent of an avoidant infant would be ignoring, rejecting, or controlling the child. The parent of an ambivalent infant would be inconsistent. The parent of a disorganized infant would be threatening and/or abusing. Although the above patterns are described for one year olds, analogous/related qualities tend to persist throughout their lives. In fact, there is another test called the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI), which can often identify the attachment patterns of an adult corresponding to her infant attachment pattern. Furthermore, parents tend to repeat their own attachment patterns (identified by AAI, or their actual infant classifications when available) with their children.

At this point, we proceed to the connection between unconditional parenting and secure attachment. First, we consider the question of whether unconditional parenting would always

lead to secure attachment. We believe this is true. Let us now imagine a parent who loves her child unconditionally. When the child becomes fussy, the parent would first try to understand the condition and the feeling of the child and then respond to the child sensitively. She would do this consistently. Even when the parent does not feel well or is busy with other things, she would not ignore, reject, manipulate, threaten, or abuse the child. So, the child would develop secure attachment.

The next question is whether unconditional parenting and secure attachment are the same thing. We do not think this is the case. In fact, we believe that there are parents who raise securely attached children while practicing conditional parenting. One difference between unconditional parenting and secure attachment is as follows: while secure attachment develops mainly at the emotional level, unconditional parenting encompasses both emotional and cognitive aspects. Earlier, we noted that attachment patterns are classified at age one. At that time, the infant’s cognition is still underdeveloped and would not be as important as emotion. On the other hand, unconditional parenting refers to concepts such as punishments and reward, which involve more cognitive components, applicable more effectively after the child passes the infant stage. Thus, while unconditional parenting would naturally develop secure attachment, secure attachment alone would not necessarily be associated with unconditional parenting. As a result, there would be a group of people who can be classified as conditional *and* secure, while nobody would be classified as unconditional *and* insecure. The situation is summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Summary of Parenting Style and Attachment Patterns

		Attachment Patterns (emotional)	
		Secure	Insecure
Parenting Style (emotional/cognitive)	Unconditional	Unconditional	N/A
	Conditional	Conditional/Secure	Insecure

The above classification seems to be consistent with the distribution of attachment patterns. It has been reported that in the Western world, approximately 60% to 70% of infant subjects are classified as securely attached. Since conditional parenting techniques are in a sense the mainstream, we believe that the percentage of those who practice unconditional parenting, and thus children with unconditional love, would be much smaller. This would leave a large number of children among the conditional/secure group.

One may point out the possibility that securely attached infants with conditional love become insecurely attached as they grow, eliminating the conditional/secure group. However, this

possibility is inconsistent with longitudinal studies. Infant attachment patterns tend to remain the same even into adulthood, as can be measured with the AAI. Then, it would be more realistic to accept the existence of the conditional/secure classification.

Reflecting the above discussion, we can speculate the development of attachment and parenting patterns in four stages as follows. First stage: when a parent raises an infant-toddler, the emotional security of the child is crucial. The child would be either securely or insecurely attached. Second stage: when the securely attached child becomes older (toddler years through adolescence), whether her parent loves her unconditionally or not would be crucial, and this leads to the distinction between unconditional and conditional/secure among the securely attached children. Third stage: when a child grows up and if she raises her own child, her attachment security, not her parenting style (between unconditional and conditional parenting), would affect the attachment security of her child. Fourth stage: when the child becomes older, the parent’s parenting style would then affect the child. In this way, attachment security and unconditional/conditional statuses are both repeated across generations, which is consistent with the observation of both Kohn and attachment theorists. This type of interlaced pattern transmission must be possible because attachment security is at the emotional level, which is stored in implicit memory (i.e., no conscious recollection is possible), while parenting (unconditional vs. conditional) is based on more cognitive, conscious efforts. The above discussion is summarized in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Development of Parenting and Attachment Patterns

Life Stages	Love/Attachment Patterns		
1. Infant-Toddler	Securely Attached		Insecurely Attached
2. Toddler-Adolescent	Unconditionally Loved	Conditionally Loved	
3. Parent of Infant-Toddler	Children: Securely Attached		Children: Insecurely Attached
4. Parent of Toddler-Adolescent	Children: Unconditionally Loved	Children: Conditionally Loved	
Parenting/Attachment Combined Types	Unconditional (also Secure)	Conditional/Secure	Insecure (also Conditional)

Although parenting and attachment patterns tend to repeat across generations, it does not need to be. It is always possible that a disaster can shatter one’s life; then, a securely attached parent may raise an insecurely attached child. At the same time, it is also possible that one can break the cycle in the other direction. Suppose that a person who is raised by parents who

loved her conditionally (i.e., conditional/secure) reads Kohn's book, is inspired, and wishes to pursue unconditional parenting. Depending on her background, she may have different types of challenges. If she is securely attached to her parent, her child should be securely attached to her. Thus, she has a good foundation. If she has strong determination to adopt the principles of unconditional parenting, which tend to go against the mainstream parenting techniques, she should be able to raise her children unconditionally. In this case, the main hurdles are at the cognitive level. Even if she finds it difficult to pursue this direction, she may be able to find some reasoning behind her thoughts.

On the other hand, if she is insecurely attached to her parent, it would be much more difficult to pursue unconditional parenting. In this case, she is likely to resist unconditional parenting with no apparent reasons, even if she thinks that unconditional parenting sounds ideal. Since the base of her insecure attachment is ingrained deep in her implicit memory, to which she has no conscious access, she would raise children who are insecurely attached to her, regardless of what she does *consciously*. So, if she is committed to parenting unconditionally and/or raising a securely attached child, she will need to recognize and change her unconscious way of responding to her child while the child is an infant. As anyone can imagine, this is extremely hard. Most parents are not even aware of the very basic ideas in attachment theory and their attachment patterns (even though many are aware of and practice attachment parenting). However, for whatever reason, if one is able to overcome attachment issues at the emotional level, it would then become more realistic to pursue the cognitive components of unconditional parenting.

Due to the difficulty associated with overcoming insecure attachment, some people may need professional help. On the other hand, strong-willed people might be able to do it by themselves. First, one can always study attachment theory and try to at least identify the source of insecure attachment. In addition, there are some new developments in neuroscience that can be useful. According to Daniel Siegel (2007), securely attached people and mindful people have some similarities in their functional brain images. In other words, insecurely attached people are in general less mindful. Then, if an insecurely attached person compensates their insecure status with mindfulness meditation, she may be able to change her deep, unconscious mind in a way useful for parenting. Since this is a relatively new idea and there is no research on this particular connection between mindfulness and parenting, it is premature to jump on to any conclusion. Nevertheless, this is certainly an exciting direction.

The notion of unconditional parenting is related to but more specific than that of secure attachment. With these two measures combined, people can be classified as follows: unconditional, conditional/secure, and insecure. Depending on their patterns, people would

react differently to Kohn's ideas of unconditional parenting. Parents with unconditional love would easily accept the ideas. Conditional/secure parents may have some difficulty. Their parents and the mainstream parenting advice all pressure them to raise children conditionally. However, their thoughts/beliefs can be changed at the cognitive level, e.g., through reading, reflecting, and practicing. On the other hand, insecurely attached parents are in the most difficult situation. They are in general not aware of their attachment issues deeply ingrained in their implicit memory. Thus, if they want to pursue unconditional parenting, they need to approach the issue at the emotional level, e.g., through professional help or mindfulness meditation. Through examination of the connection between unconditional parenting and secure attachment, we can better understand people's reaction to Kohn's book. In fact, one's reaction to his book must be a key to understanding one's own parenting practice, including attachment issues. We hope that this essay is helpful for those who are interested in unconditional parenting, especially for those who considered Kohn's book ideal but not realistic.

References

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